

Guidance on Completing Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity (SOGI) Questions for Universal Application

Definitions

- **Gender Identity:** A person's innate, deeply felt psychological identification as a man, woman, combination of both or some other gender which may or may not correspond to the sex assigned to them at birth.
- **Sexual Orientation:** An individual's physical and/or emotional attraction to the same and/or different gender than their own. "Gay," "lesbian," "bisexual" and "straight" are all examples of sexual orientations.
- **Gender Expression:** is a person's behavior, mannerisms, and outward appearance that are associated with gender within a cultural context: for example, feminine, masculine, a combination of both or something unique to the person.

Why is it important to collect participant information about gender identity and sexual orientation?

Individuals who are lesbian, gay, bisexual (LGB) or transgender or gender non-binary (TGNB) experience significant social, health and economic disparities and historically have had less visibility in our society. In order to build more inclusive and equitable practices, we are now collecting sexual orientation and gender identity (SOGI) demographic information, so as to have a better understanding of the representation and needs of our participants. Gathering this data is critical for providing affirming services to LGB and TGNC populations, as well as determining the extent to which our programs and services meet their needs. This information may seem a little bit personal at first, however, it is important to ask so as to make space to affirm and include all identities.

An important element in providing affirming community services is to ask about gender identity, sex assigned at birth and sexual orientation in a manner that is respectful and inclusive. This includes honoring the different ways that people define themselves or refuse to define themselves.

The expansion in options is intended to ensure that, as CBO's complete grant reporting requirements, it will not create a barrier to service or stigmatizing experience for any individual. When a provider asks about an individual's gender identity, sex assigned at birth and sexual orientation, it is essential that an open and accepting attitude be demonstrated.

Getting Comfortable Asking Clients About Gender Identity and Sexual Orientation

Asking questions about a participant’s gender identity, sex assigned at birth and sexual orientation in a manner that is culturally sensitive is an essential part of your work as a community and social service provider. We understand that some of this information may be new to some staff, so an important first step is to assess your own level of comfort and familiarity with these questions. Below is a list of 6 statements. If you answer “yes” to any of these statements, review the suggestion in the column to the right.

STATEMENT	SUGGESTION
I would get nervous or uncomfortable asking one or more of these questions.	Practice asking the questions with a supervisor or co-worker. Consider attending LGB and TGNB awareness training with a DYCD Technical Assistance provider or the DYCD Program Integration and Equity Specialist.
I don’t think it is right that I am required to ask these questions.	Using appropriate language is essential to building participant trust and to establishing safe spaces to receive community services. Inclusivity is both one of DYCD’s core values as a funder, and a requirement for all contracted providers.
Hearing someone answer one or more of these questions will make me uncomfortable.	Talk with your supervisor or co-workers about this and consider attending a training or other professional development session to learn more about LGB and TGNB populations.
I think that, for most participants, you can tell the answers to these questions without having to ask them.	Providers are not able to accurately identify a person’s sexual orientation or gender identity by looking at them; people should have the opportunity to self-identify their gender identity and sexual orientation. Besides, beginning open dialogue is an important step in promoting effective communication between providers and participants.
I feel overwhelmed by all of the different options for gender identity and sexual orientation.	It is true that the number of fields have been increased. Guidance from community members indicated that each additional field is needed to respect the range of diversity of people being served.
I want to provide stigma-free, affirming services but it seems like this is taking things too far.	Feedback from community members indicated that each new field is required to ensure all participants have options for gender identity or sexual orientation that are affirming.

Frequently Asked Questions

1. Do I really have to fill out these fields for every program participant?

Yes. It should be done routinely as part of participant intake and reviewed and referred to when providing services to participants. Participants have the option to decline to answer with most questions, but they still must be asked and in sequence.

2. Is it acceptable practice to answer the questions based on my observations of the participant rather than asking the questions directly?

It is not acceptable to answer the questions based on your observation or assumptions regarding a participant. Experience shows that social and community service providers are not able to identify their client's gender or sexual orientation with high levels of accuracy. More importantly, asking the questions creates the opportunity for open dialogue with a participant being able to decide what language is most affirming for them, which is one of the important reasons for asking the question.

3. How should I respond if a participant gets angry or appears offended that I asked the question?

Simply explain that this is now a standard practice of all city agencies and no offense was intended.

4. What should I say if the participant asks who has access to the answers to these questions?

If a participant asks about who will have access to this information or indicates concern about confidentiality, explain that only the organization's staff and select DYCD staff will have access to their information.

5. What if my participant's sexual orientation or gender identity isn't an option on the list?

While compiling the terms to include in the update, we knew that we would not be able to include all terms. Please use the write-in option for any terms not listed. The write-in option should *only* be used for any terms not already listed.

6. Am I responsible for updating the answer if there are changes over time?

You are responsible to ask a returning participant to review and update their information in their application when they re-enroll in your program. If responses change during this time period, you are required to change it in the system.

7. Will my organization be penalized if many participants choose not to respond to these questions?

Organizations will not be penalized if participants choose not to respond to the new SOGI questions. However, if an agency has consistent difficulty eliciting honest responses, this may be a reflection of the staff's discomfort and should be addressed through supervision and training.

8. What is the role of supervisors or program managers in promoting culturally sensitive discussion of these questions and high quality data collection?

Supervisors and program managers are responsible for creating an environment in which staff and participants can have dialogue about gender identity and sexual orientation in a safe and supportive manner. Steps should be taken to ensure the best practices are used to maintain high quality data and as well as an affirming atmosphere for participants. If issues arise, the supervisor or program manager should address them during staff meetings, offer training and consider using quality improvement practices to address them.